

# The Bubble, the Burn, and the Simmer: Locating Sexuality in Social Science

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Shortly before *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* appeared on bookstore shelves in 1993, *Glamour* magazine produced a photo essay about two girls who accompanied one another as dates to their high school prom. *Redbook* published without fanfare a story about lesbian parenthood entitled, "My Two Moms." As the decade rolled on, television sitcoms began tossing bit parts to gay characters. A job ad appeared in the newsletter of the American Anthropological Association with "lesbian/gay issues" tucked away into a long list of potentially desirable specializations. Something called "queer theory" found its way into English departments and the pages of the *New York Times*. Publishers signed five-figure, even six-figure, book deals with researchers in the emerging field of lesbian/gay studies. Critics as well as supporters of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender (LGBT) movement asserted that the movement had encouraged the study of sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Professors began to lament that the social sciences had lagged behind the humanities in taking advantage of these new opportunities

(Stein and Plummer 1994). Sexuality had suddenly become a "hot," if not quite respectable, topic for investigation.<sup>1</sup>

Suddenly? In this popular truncated version of the history of scholarship on sexuality, an increasingly "open" social climate allows queer theory to "liberate" sexuality for study, with the humanities leading the way (cf. Seidman 1994). A narrative of progress if ever there was one. But in order to portray research on sexuality as a late-breaking development, the raconteurs of this tale have to pass quickly over widely publicized empirical studies of sexual behavior from mid-century by investigators such as Alfred Kinsey, William Masters, and Virginia Johnson. In order to portray social science as a latecomer to the party, they also have to minimize the contributions of an array of investigators who matched Kinsey in commitment, if not acclaim. During her lifetime the psychologist Evelyn Hooker (1965, 1967) received little more than a nod for bringing the study of homosexuality out from under the rubric of deviance. Over in sociology, William Gagnon and John Simon (1973)

Kath Weston, The Bubble, the Burn, and the Simmer: Introduction: Locating Sexuality in Social Science, from *Long Slow Burn: Sexuality and Social Science*, by Kath Weston, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 1-27, 213-215. Reprinted with permission of Taylor & Francis Group LLC.

*Sexualities in Anthropology: A Reader*, edited by Andrew P. Lyons and Harriet D. Lyons  
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were developing their concept of “sexual scripts” while the parents of some of today’s queer theorists were debating the merits of cloth versus disposable diapers. When W. H. R. Rivers embarked on a multidisciplinary expedition to the Torres Straits at the turn of the century, he wasn’t just interested in mythology or gardening techniques. He also posed questions about marriage, erotic dreams, and conception (see Kuklick 1991).

A few of the earliest researchers, such as the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, are remembered as pioneers in their fields, but rarely because they studied sexuality. Most are barely remembered at all. Yet the impact of their findings has extended beyond their respective disciplines to shape debates about sexuality and intimacy that still grip the popular imagination. Thus the long, slow character of the burn, or at least the simmer.

This forgotten legacy of sexuality within the social sciences intimates that the present resurgence of interest in the topic represents something more than an abrupt enlightenment or a newfound “openness” toward controversial issues. Nor can the latest burst of scholarship on sexuality be explained by allegations that multicultural politics have conspired with a “gay agenda” to foment sexual revolution in ivory tower offices and high school locker rooms. Within the social sciences, too much research predates the late-twentieth-century movements for social justice to legitimate such a contention, and even research conducted in conjunction with those movements has encountered formidable opposition. While activists have worked hard, against great odds, to clear a space for study, the latest round of graduate student papers on transgender identity, international gay organizing, and abstinence is just one installment in a much longer story. Queer studies, as an outgrowth of the LGBT movement, may have insisted upon stirring up the pot. But queer studies hasn’t been the first to assemble the ingredients or turn up the fire.

[...] If sexuality is already deeply embedded in the topics and debates that constitute social science’s stock-in-trade, then more explicit attention to those aspects of social life marginalized as “just sex” has the potential to reconfigure conventional analysis along more productive lines.[...]

What does the most recent surge of research on sexuality mean for business-as-usual in the social sciences? What does queer scholarship have to say to taken-for-granted ways of understanding bodies, relationships, and lives? What kind of scholarship can truly come to grips with the inequalities of our time? What will it take to bring research on sexuality out of the universities and into the streets or onto the airwaves? Are there contiguities between the new research and the old? The answers to these questions depend upon making a distinction between investigating sexuality *per se* and investigating the ways in which sexuality can become embedded in any and every topic constituted as an object for research. It’s one thing to study sexuality as an entity unto itself; it’s quite another to study the infusion of sexuality into the very pursuit of knowledge.

[...] A person cannot “just” study sexuality, because sexuality is never separate from history, “class,” “race,” or a host of other social relations. [...] Once s/he begins paying attention to sexuality, social issues never appear in quite the same light again.

If sexuality is already integral to many of the topics examined by social scientists, it is equally integral to the history of social science disciplines. I mean this not just in the obvious sense that researchers have devoted long hours to analyzing the timing of orgasms, the social construction of impotence, the sexual metaphors in descriptions of trade wars or military maneuvers that hope to “penetrate,” and the contrasting ways in which societies handle “adultery.” I also mean that the classic debates which molded social science into a distinctive set of disciplines relied, often as not, on illustrative examples drawn from the “realm” of sexuality.

Go back to foundational studies of cognition and you will find “marriage classes” used to explain “primitive classification.” Scratch the surface of the concept of social organization and you will lay bare speculative debates in which some scholars hypothesized sexual jealousy where others imagined an evolutionary stage of promiscuity. Look a few steps past the figures customarily associated with sex, and you will find Durkheim, Mauss, and Weber consorting with the likes of Darwin and

Doctor Freud. Nor are such instances confined to the past. Consider, for one, that eminently contemporary and highly contentious debate on reflexivity in social science. As researchers ponder whether or not to use “I” in their work, they are, in effect, grappling with aspects of cultural categories (narcissism, confession, self-indulgence, kiss-and-tell) that have become parceled off, boxed up, and increasingly marketed under the rubric of sex.

Put this way, the study of sexuality starts to look like the bread and butter of the social sciences, rather than the sure-fire prescription for academic suicide as it was described to me during my student days. Yet it is important to understand precisely how sexuality came to be construed as a compact and isolated subtopic, a matter of specialized study for the few renegade scholars foolish enough to pay it any mind. Only once sexuality becomes cordoned off in the professional imagination from the examination of religion, diaspora, voting behavior, interpersonal dynamics, community organization, and a million other facets of social life does the study of sexuality become a professional bridge-jump. Only then can it be said that a move to position sexuality at the heart of the disciplines does not describe social science as usual, or at least social science as most people have been trained to know it.

For all the attention recently garnered by queer theory, institutions of higher learning continue to ghettoize the study of sexuality. Best to pack it safely away, isolate it in the corner of a discipline, give it very limited standing as a subfield, maybe organize a lesbian/gay studies department, but preferably just revise the curriculum to offer a token course or two. Best not to let sexuality wander too much farther afield, lest it come into contact with subjects near and dear to the hearts of “mainstream” scholars, not to mention a wider public.

It wasn’t always this way. What processes have obscured the links between the efflorescence of work associated with queer studies and earlier scholarship? What is the price of that forgetting? What allows researchers to sound credible when they insist that sexuality has little bearing on the rest of social science inquiry? How did sexuality come to be

formulated as a fringe topic that can get any scholar’s license to presumed heterosexuality revoked? One place to look for clues is on the hallowed ground where empiricism meets ethnography.

## What Do They Do? Hunting the (Homo)Sexual in Early Ethnography

In some parts of Western Australia, wrote R. H. Mathews in 1900, a circumcised man would be allotted an uncircumcised brother of the woman he would later marry. “The boy is used for purposes of masturbation and sodomy, and constantly accompanies the man” (125). Mathews described the arrangement in matter-of-fact terms and followed his comments with an account of the uses of heated sand to keep warm during winter months in the desert. Thirty years later, in “Women and Their Life in Central Australia,” G. Róheim progressed directly from a list of the foodstuffs gathered by women (tubers, fruit, lizards, birds’ eggs, mice) to a description of a dance in which men sounded a musical instrument called an *ulpura*. “The woman who hears it follows [the player] when he goes hunting, and finally she elopes with him.” On the same occasion, “the first lover of a woman will go up to the husband and ask him to give her back for one night, and he is expected to grant this wish” (1933: 208–209).

Like the chronicles from the voyages of exploration on which they were modeled, many early ethnographies adopted a flora-and-fauna approach to the study of sexuality (cf. Kuklick 1997). Details of social life that European and North American observers considered “sexual” provided nothing more and nothing less than additional data. In many accounts that took the form of a report back from the field, “sexual acts” did not seem to call for specialized examination, much less a disciplinary subfield. They merely constituted phenomena to be documented and integrated into monographs that compiled information on everything from edible plants to myths, from body painting to funerary practices.

Kava drinking, circumcision, “a special form of *nambas* or penis wrapper,” hereditary chieftainship, and “a remarkable organization of male homosexuality” share a paragraph in A. Bernard Deacon’s 1934 monograph, *Malekula* (14). Mutual masturbation and the removal of one or two upper front teeth (for aesthetic reasons) share a page in Melville Herskovits’s *Dahomey* (1938: 289). In Papua New Guinea, young men were said to eat limes to prevent pregnancy from male-male intercourse during initiation ceremonies (F. E. Williams 1936: 200–201). And in the lowlands of northern Colombia, according to Julian Steward and Louis Faron, both rich men and chiefs practiced polygyny. After the authors duly noted the presence of female prostitutes and “a special class of male inverters who went from village to village selling their sexual services” among the Calamari, they moved on with the same deliberation to examine war patterns, cannibalism, and something called a “priest-temple-idol complex” (1959: 223).

Some observers offered thicker descriptions. Instead of cataloging “inverts” and acts, they explained how adults negotiated rights to children in cases of “adultery” or how children ignored adults when they wanted to engage in “sex play” (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1951: 91; Berndt and Berndt 1951: 86–87). John Shortt (1873: 402) devoted an entire article to “the true Kojahs, or Eunuchs” left in charge of the women’s quarters of “Mussulman nobles” in southern India. His essay contributed less to the establishment of sexuality as a subfield than to the ethnographic project that called upon social science to verify the existence of diverse “peoples” in order to place them firmly within the annals of discovery.

Nor was this documentary imperative some antiquated holdover from the turn of the century. In her study of Nyakyusa age-villages in Africa, Monica Wilson took the time to point out that the word for sex play between girls, *ubugalagala*, doubled as a word for the “wicked cleverness” of witches (1963: 94). Her reason for including the information in this context? The linguistic resonance had significance for other topics of interest to Wilson, including witchcraft and “mystical interdependence.” Raymond Kelly followed a

similar logic in his study of witchcraft by alluding to the Etoro belief that “heterosexual intercourse in a garden will cause the crops to wither and die” (1976: 45). When June Nash wrote up her research on tin miners in Bolivia, she included a description of Carnival that encompassed not only music, costume, and cosmology, but also the “perverse dance combinations where whites play blacks, men play women, and all the contradictions of their lot in life are transformed into the opposite and transcended” (1979: 318). Whatever one might think of the appeal to transcendence, crossdressing features in the account in such a way that it is simultaneously noted and brought to bear on a more extensive discussion of racial categories and oppression.

Of course, what these researchers busied themselves documenting (in a manner integral to the reports on kava drinking and taro cultivation) were phenomena they *perceived* to be sexual. The categories that framed their descriptions – perversion, inversion, adultery, norm, marriage, homosexuality, transvestism – came straight out of Euroamerica. Social scientists imported classificatory schemes that marked some things as erotic (and others as not) along with their rucksacks, typewriters, and steamer trunks. No wonder that ethnographies often made non-sense to the very people they were supposed to describe.

And a complex sort of nonsense it was, given the colonial situation that prevailed in most of the locations under study. Nationalist movements frequently stressed the “normality” of local practices in response to European characterizations of colonial subjects as sexually uncontrollable and perverse. In the context of domination, people could not always afford to undo the sexualizing logic of the colonial powers.

Anticolonialist movements ended up building certain arguments for home rule on the backs of European categories and, some would say, local women. Dress modestly. Clothe yourself to swim. No “obscene” dances. No drums. No daring backless blouses. Hands off the colonial equation of nudity with immorality and lust. Scrutinize your wives’ and daughters’ every gesture for “unbecoming” implications in order to demonstrate yourself fit to govern.

This was a rhetorical strategy that adopted the language of sexuality to speak propriety and decorum to power. Its consequences and its ironies are still in the process of being unraveled.<sup>2</sup>

So it is not quite correct to say that the notetakers and the about-to-be-annotated subscribed to independent, much less mutually incomprehensible, modes of “thinking sex” and thinking relationship.<sup>3</sup> Rather, they participated in the *interdependent* exchanges of groups locked in struggle, in which sexualization offered both a rhetorical chip and a weapon. There is plenty that Samoans of Margaret Mead’s time could have said (and did) about a book index in which “Fa’atama (tomboy)” succeeded “Elopement”; “Lavalava (loincloth)” found itself sandwiched between “Love affairs” and “Incest”; while an entry for “Sex” subdivided into “Sex (erogenous zones),” “Sex (experimentation),” “Sex (friendship),” “Sex (techniques),” “Sex (adventure),” and “Sex (American girl).”<sup>4</sup> But not without a political cost.

In the earliest days of ethnography, social scientists tended to conceive of sexuality as a self-evident, perhaps intriguing, perhaps disgusting, possibly trivial, but nevertheless unified object for inquiry.<sup>5</sup> This was no category with meanings shaped by class warfare and colonial struggle, but a force both primal and given. That Thing Called Sex might be forever molded and sculpted by social forces, leading to tremendous variety in the ways that people around the world “do it.” But there “it” was, awaiting report or observation, firmly grounded in a biological substrate of hormones and drives. Only with the newer scholarship that followed in the wake of publications such as Erving Goffman’s *Stigma* would researchers begin to see needs, identities, desires, and repulsions as themselves socially constructed, their power explicable only with reference to something larger than the individual and biology. After that, the mind became a contender for the most erogenous zone (Ross and Rapp 1983).

Meanwhile, cultural relativism had gained ground. In the absence of any serious analysis of history or colonialism, the tremendous variety in erotic practices appeared to be the

product of localized preferences and localized “traditions.” If Ojibwa etiquette demanded cross-cousin joking that could edge over into flirtation (Landes 1937) and young men undergoing initiation in parts of New Guinea had to “practise sodomy in order to become tall and strong” (Landtman 1927: 237), well, that seemed to represent no more and no less a range than could be found in matters of religion or diet.

Although many ethnographies professed not to judge what they described, a certain amount of evaluation was inevitably conveyed in the description. “Adultery” is hardly a nonjudgmental term and “invert” sounds like something your kid would hate to be called on the playground. “Homosexual” implied a life-long identification, yet researchers applied the word to rituals that lasted only months, years, or days. But even those like Malinowski who approached the topic of sexuality with a certain distaste argued strongly for its place within social science: “Man is an animal, and, as such, at times unclean, and the honest anthropologist has to face this fact” (1927: 6).

Of course, not all researchers approached the phenomena they dubbed “sexual” with equal aplomb. In some instances, sex appears as a “present absence” in ethnography. An investigator notes the “sexual” character of something observed and then either affirms his or her reluctance to discuss it, or simply moves on without comment. In his classic essay, “Religion as a Cultural System,” for example, Clifford Geertz described a Rangda-Barong performance in Bali, in which the “witch” Rangda (taken by some as an incarnation of the Hindu goddess Durga) “evokes fear (as well as hatred, disgust, cruelty, horror, and, though I have not been able to treat the sexual aspects of the performance here, lust)” (1973: 118). At a later date, perhaps?

Over the years, entire articles on sexuality and even the occasional book did emerge within the ethnographic literature. Malinowski’s *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* is among the best known, but there were also articles by Edward Westermarck on “Homosexual Love” (1906), Ruth Benedict on “Sex in Primitive Society” (1939), Ruth Landes on “A Cult Matriarchate and Male

Homosexuality" (1940), Ian Hogbin on "The Sexual Life of the Natives of Wogeo, New Guinea" (1946), Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt on "Sexual Behavior in Western Arnhem Land" (1951), Robert Suggs on "Marquesan Sexual Behavior" (1966), Alice Kehoe on "The Function of Ceremonial Sexual Intercourse Among the Northern Plains Indians" (1970), and Evans-Pritchard on "Sexual Inversion Among the Azande" (1970), to name only a few. A veritable cottage industry arose on Two-Spirits (formerly called by the pejorative *berdache*), a category applied across American Indian groups to describe people considered at once sacred, cross-gendered or multiply gendered, and therefore inadequately described by terms such as "homosexual" or "bisexual" (see Lang 1996: 92).

This deliberately eclectic collection of sources suggests that, when it comes to establishing a lineage for the study of sexuality, social scientists are not dealing with the odd article out. There are plenty more ethnographies where these came from, without even extending the search to anthropology's sister-disciplines of psychology and sociology. Yet the references to sexuality in early ethnographies are important for more than their ability to dispute the joanna-come-lately charges aimed at queer studies. The colonial "adventure" that informed these ethnographies has had a lasting impact on the way that researchers (and the public) approach the study of sexuality (Stoler 1995). So has the on-again, off-again alliance of social science with "hard" science. In the popular imagination, the social sciences have become associated with a reductive sort of empiricism that contemporary research on sexuality has yet to shake. Nowhere is this more evident than in the question that runs from the latest sex survey right back through early ethnographic accounts: *What do they do?*

"*What do they do?*" There is only so much to be gleaned from the information that Marquesan children live in fear of being reprimanded for masturbation, but that "the error appears to lie in being so inept as to be caught at any of these activities ... rather than in the activity itself" (Suggs 1966: 46). First of all, this isolated observation offers no context. Are we talking pre- or post-missionary? Who

asks and who answers, under what sorts of conditions? Whose category, this "masturbation"? How is the presentation of this decontextualized observation linked to a larger intellectual/political project? Yes, it's data, but never simply data. Data is selected and collected, used and abused by researchers who are always in some sense a product of their times.

Such a litany may approach methodological truism at this late date, but like good sex, it bears repeating. The point is not just that social science has more to contribute to the study of sexuality than forays into social life that bring back data in bits and relatively undigested pieces. The point is also that the long history of flora-and-fauna accounts of sexuality – a history coextensive with ethnography itself – has fostered a mistaken impression of social science research on sexuality as an overwhelmingly empirical project. Empirical it has been and must be, but not without an edge that is simultaneously moral, theoretical, political, and analytical.

To the extent that early ethnography has helped sustain a "just the facts, ma'am" approach to social science research on sexuality, ethnography's relevance exceeds the anthropological. Caricatures of social science as a data-spewing science were only reinforced when attention shifted from "Them" to "Us," from exotics abroad to misfits at home, from analyses that focused on difference to analyses that heralded deviance.<sup>6</sup> From the moment that "deviance" emerged as a topic for scholarship and a foil for "the norm," the topic was sexualized. College courses on deviance were much more likely to cover cross-dressing than political rebellion or the odd girl out who hated apple pie, refused to salute the flag, and resisted the postwar marketing imperative to consume. In the interim, Kinsey had arrived on the scene to tabulate interviews on sexuality into percentages: 37 (not 35, not 38) percent of American men had experienced homosexual sex to orgasm. Masters and Johnson showed up with electric leads to hook up volunteers to machines that monitored, measured, and ultimately condensed a host of bodily functions (heart rate, sweat) into a "human sexual response cycle" (J. Jones 1997; Robinson 1989).

Sexology's mid-century aspiration to scientific precision gelled well enough with the approach of turn-of-the-century expeditions that had taken the world as their lab. But a renewed emphasis on data entailed a diminished recognition for the importance of the analytic frameworks that give form to data itself. Cultural relativism, to take just one such framework, has had a tremendous impact on how people think about "nature," "sexuality," and human possibility.

For all their utility and appeal, then, flora-and-fauna approaches contributed mightily to the fantasy of the social scientist as documentarian, a purveyor of distilled data ready to be taken up into other people's theories and analyses. What is at stake when so much attention accrues to social science as a source of "facts," and so little to data's uses, derivation, or production? Why, when it comes to social science's *theoretical* contributions to the study of sexuality, do so many still feel compelled to avert their eyes?

Before I move to examine that question in greater depth, I want to consider another way in which social scientists have been writing about sexuality all along. The grab bag of erotic practices integrated into flora-and-fauna accounts is the least of what's lost when contemporary research on sexuality proceeds without an understanding of its heritage. In the early years of social science, researchers staked out a territory for fledgling disciplines based upon case studies, illustrations, and debates that prominently featured matters of sexuality. So it is not merely that there is a theoretical component to research on sexuality in the social sciences. There is also a sexual component to the most basic social science theory. Without it, there wouldn't be a social science. Or more precisely, there wouldn't be *this* social science.

## How the Social Scientist Got Her Spots

Think about some of the founding concepts and debates in social science, the kind any aspiring researcher spends hours commit-

ting to memory in graduate school. Social organization. Families and kinship. Norms and roles. The incest taboo. Nature versus culture. Diffusion versus independent invention. Interpretations of myth. Reciprocity and the gift. Work. Ritual. Solidarity. Cognitive competence. Inheritance and resource transfers. Primitive promiscuity. Evolution. The division of labor. Gender differences. Social stratification. International relations. The Protestant ethic. Characteristics that distinguish homo sapiens from the rest of the animals. Society. Instinct. Culture. Change. Some (the incest taboo, primitive promiscuity) appear more explicitly sexual than others (the exchange of gifts). But each and every one of these pivotal concepts in the history of social science drafted sexuality into the service of some "larger" debate.

The move usually happened in one of two ways. In the more pedestrian instance, an aspect of the erotic occupied center stage not as an isolated datum point, but as evidence advanced to make an argument. To take just one example, in that founding document of social science, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber groups "temptations of the flesh" with "idleness" in a discussion of Puritan reservations about the pursuit of wealth (1958: 157). Here the material related to sexuality is offered almost as an aside, a small matter duly noted, but one that buttresses the author's point. Something similar occurs when E. E. Evans-Pritchard includes "virility medicine" in a more extensive catalog of Azande medicines, or explains the resort to "good magic" by describing how a man might employ magic to determine who was sleeping with his wife. Readers learn that good magic can be used not only to find out "who has committed adultery," but also who has "stolen his spears or killed his kinsman" (1976: 183, 189). [...] The activity marked as sexual appears alongside nonsexual activities, but Evans-Pritchard offers it up as more than description or detail, because he uses the observation about "adultery" to support a particular analysis of witchcraft.

[...]

The second type of liaison between sex and analysis in social science was by far the more

spectacular, and of more lasting consequence. In this case, authors treated sexual relations as a paradigmatic instance that offered either the best illustration of a concept or the best means of adjudicating an argument. “Puberty” (initiation) rites, with their implicit reference to sexual maturation, almost came to define the general category of ritual in both the popular and scholarly imagination.<sup>7</sup> Researchers interested in cognition did not just ask people to narrate inkblots, explain their reasoning, and fit odd shapes into boxes. They also gravitated toward a highly sexualized form of the \$64,000 question: Was it possible that Those Savages understood the mechanics of human conception? (Show that you can give a biological accounting for fatherhood and you too can be granted mental acuity, accompanied by a fair-to-middling post on the evolutionary ladder.)<sup>8</sup> Likewise, when social scientists began to develop the concept of a norm, it was heavily indebted to contrasts drawn with the practices of “Others” imagined to fall outside the norm’s parameters. These Others, pictured as deviant or exotic or both, were supposed to be recognizable in part by sexual excess (cf. Bleys 1995).

In each case, the analytic turn toward sexuality sought out material that would prove exemplary rather than interesting of its own accord. When Marcel Mauss developed his analysis of gift-giving as a device that created social solidarities, he took from Malinowski’s work on the Trobriand Islands the notion that relations between husband and wife constituted the “pure” gift. “One of the most important acts noted by the author,” declared Mauss, “and one which throws a strong light on sexual relationships, is the *mapula*, the sequence of payments by a husband to his wife as a kind of salary for sexual services” (1967: 71).<sup>9</sup> When Mauss teamed up with Emile Durkheim (1963) to study so-called primitive classification, “marriage classes” (moieties) provided a key component of their analysis. They contended that the division of some societies into two camps (the eligible and the off-limits) had provided researchers with a way of understanding different kinds of logic and basic modalities of human thought. In most of the societies they examined, what

they referred to as “marriage” had its erotic dimensions, although sex did not necessarily feature as the centerpiece that it is often assumed to be in a society that claims “a good sex life” as a birthright.

Shadowing these discussions are philosophical treatises about human nature and fantasies about human beings in a primeval state. When it came to inquiry into what, if anything, humans universally share, the lynchpin of debate often as not turned out to involve sexuality. One still hotly contested concept, the incest taboo, became a stepping-stone to the theorization of social relations. Does *everyone* (at least officially) find it repugnant to sleep with their children and their parents? What about siblings? Half-siblings? What to make of the coexistence of groups that forbid cousin marriage and groups that enjoin it (see Wolf 1995)? At stake for many writers was not an understanding of eroticism *per se*. More to the point were questions about the degree to which biology dictates the ordering of human relationships. The move to push back the claims for biology in turn created room for new analytic concepts such as “society” and “culture.”

The culture concept has accrued a range of meanings over the years, including “high” art, custom, collective invention, the constructedness of practically everything, and the possibility of multiple cultures. In a global economy where very little seems discretely bounded, the notion of culture has undergone sustained critique, but at the time that it first circulated widely within the social sciences, scholars explained culture in part by opposing it to “instinct.” Seemingly inevitably, the path to instinct led through sex. Instinct paired birds with birds, bees with bees, and humans with other humans, but only humans went a step beyond instinct to give rules, regulations, and irate relatives a say in how they mated. Or so said the wisdom of the day.<sup>10</sup>

The work of Sigmund Freud, who wrote extensively on the topic of instinct, was also tremendously influential in moving sexuality to a position of prominence within social science. Before literary critics struck up their latter-day flirtation with psychoanalysis, psychologists and anthropologists tried their hand at the

game. But Freud was not some Ur-source who accomplished this feat single-handedly. He himself was in the habit of citing ethnography to make his points, not only in the celebrated *Totem and Taboo* (1918), but also in essays such as “The Sexual Aberrations” (1975). And writing well before Freud were authors who pitched their arguments on the terrain of sexuality without becoming known as scholars of sex. Among them were Lewis Henry Morgan, Frederick Engels, Henry Maine, John McLennan, Emile Durkheim, and Charles Darwin.

Back in the emphatically pre-Freudian days of the nineteenth century, scholars endlessly debated the theory that societies progress through a number of developmental stages, the first being “primitive promiscuity.” In his 1865 study, *Primitive Marriage*, McLennan speculated that men in the earliest societies had originally mated indiscriminately with women of the group. Under such conditions, no one could trace biological fatherhood with any hope of certainty. Darwin vociferously disagreed, contending that “sexual jealousy was a fundamental emotion, and that it must have contributed to the early establishment of orderly mating arrangements amongst men” (Kuper 1988: 40). Engels picked up where McLennan left off, arguing that primitive promiscuity was obviously unsuitable for a system of private property. How would men know who stood to inherit? Something must have succeeded “the horde” once large-scale agriculture made the accumulation of surpluses possible. Engels, who drew heavily upon Lewis Henry Morgan’s research on Iroquois Indians, proposed that this something was “the family.” The family as Engels envisioned it restricted access to women in a way that allowed for the institutionalization of private property and control over its now regularized transmission.

What was at issue in the debate about primitive promiscuity? Not so much the “mating practices” of a bygone era, but an understanding of power relations: who owns, who inherits, who controls. The same debate provided an opportunity to elaborate theories of development and social evolution. Few, if any, of the authors who participated in the debate on primitive promiscuity set out to

write about sexuality. Typically they came at sexuality from another angle, beginning with ostensibly asexual topics for investigation. How do you explain the logic for property transfers? The division of labor? Social organization? Changing modes of production? The rise of the state? They ended up writing page after page about marriage alliances, sexual jealousy, promiscuity, and the like.

In these speculative accounts, the way that a group handles eroticism becomes a marker of social (dis)organization and evolutionary advance. Joseph Marie Degérando, writing during the French Enlightenment, reflected on the state of “savage” society by asking, among other things, if “savages” focused love on one person alone and whether “such a degree of brutalization” existed among them that “the women … go [naked] in front of men without blushing” (Stocking 1968: 25). How different were his concerns from those raised by Darwin, Engels, Maine, and McLennan more than half a century later? Given that many turn-of-the-century writers on evolution attributed darker skin to “savages” and “barbarians” as a matter of course (Stocking 1968: 132), the hypersexualization that was integral to the invention of the primitive would reappear in some of the most patently offensive stereotypes associated with the emerging concept of “race.”

Out-and-out racism characterized the decades-long search for a “missing link.” And where did social scientists go to seek this putative bridge between human and ape? To sexual relations generally and Africa specifically. In the many spurious accounts of African women who mated with orangutans or chimpanzees, heterosexual intercourse symbolized a continuity between humans and animals, in sharp contrast to tool use and the acquisition of language, which figured as tropes for a reassuring division of “man” from beast. When Europeans caged and exhibited a Khoi woman as “The Hottentot Venus,” her lasciviousness was assumed, while the size of her genitalia became a matter for public comment and censure (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 104, 123; Gilman 1985).<sup>11</sup>

The eroticization of the search for a missing link cannot be understood apart from the

concomitant search for a rationale for domination. As many have pointed out, social science lends itself admirably to the uses of intervention.<sup>12</sup> Terms such as “primitive promiscuity” may have been speculative, but they were not without worldly effect. Maine’s *Ancient Society*, which followed Darwin’s position on “sexual jealousy” in the primitive promiscuity debates, can also be read as a pseudo-historical polemic against Indian independence (cf. Kuper 1988: 18–20). So long as colonial subjects lived lives of sexual immorality, the product of a rudimentary (“patriarchal”) stage of social evolution, who were they to take up agitation in the name of Home Rule?

After Captain Cook returned from his first voyages, European romantics tethered dreams of free love to the South Sea islands (Stocking 1992: 307). Their less romantic peers gazed into the same mirror and walked away aghast at the image of a sexuality so “out of control” it seemed to beg for European “civilization” to set it to rights. Of course, bare skin that intimated lust to colonial eyes could signify very differently to people who thought the colonizers fools for fainting away in the monsoon heat in their button-downs.

These fevered fantasies of the colonial imagination came down hard on people under even nominal European or American control. Clothes, music, art, and anything else judged “obscene” by imported standards frequently became hybridized, displaced, or forced underground. Rampant eroticization also had a boomerang effect, both upon social science and upon the societies that proposed to rule. International relations emerged as a subfield from a shuffle of papers that attributed impotence, effeminacy, and enervation to countries, if not entire climates. Sociological studies of immigrant communities in the United States helped establish government standards for housing. When the state stepped in to assume custody of children in cases of neglect, judgments about “overcrowding” (based upon whose standard, what manner of living?) reflected fears that kids might see adults “doing it,” not just safety issues regarding tenements in disrepair.

Social science also had a hand in producing the relief that some readers feel when

they learn that neither a proclivity for nipples nor an 8.5-centimeter penis falls outside the (social-science-produced) “norm” (see Masters and Johnson 1966: 191). Some bad psychology and even worse incarceration programs have been developed in search of “cures” for departures from that norm. And it’s a sure bet that adolescents who tease their friends about a sexual repertoire limited to “the missionary position” seldom have in mind the centuries of violence and religious/political repression interred in that phrase. Nor need they be conscious of the debt that the aspiration to master an elaborate array of sexual techniques owes to colonialist escapades.<sup>13</sup>

Even methodological debates could turn on issues of sexuality. In anthropology, the Mead/Freeman controversy was fought out (in part) over the issue of forcible rape. Freeman attacked Mead’s reputation with the claim that forcible rape had, indeed, taken place on Samoa during the years when Mead heralded its virtual absence (see Stocking 1992: 332). Did forcible rape occur on Samoa or not? Was it common? [...] In this case, sex offered a site for testing out the reliability of a method and the limits of professional credibility.

Researchers who presumed “sexual acts” to be abstractable and so in principle available for scholarly inspection ran into problems when they tried to employ the methodological staples of the social science arsenal. If they used surveys, they found that sexuality again offered a paradigmatic case, this time regarding a methodological issue called the problem of self-report. How could social scientists gauge the veracity of retrospective testimony about something like sex without subjecting it to first-hand investigation (Lewontin 1995)? That left the methodological techniques of observation and, yes, participation.<sup>14</sup> What means were justified to gain knowledge of sexuality? What ethics should prevail? The turn to examine sexuality as a discrete object for inquiry threatened to lay bare the voyeurism (not to mention the romanticism) embedded more generally in the documentary project.

[...] From the very beginning, assumptions about sexuality infused social science concepts such as normality, evolution, progress, organization, development, and change.

Likewise, judgments about sexuality remain deeply embedded in the history of scholarly explanations for who acquires power, who deserves it, and who gets to keep it. The same can be said for a multitude of theories about cognition, reciprocity, gender, race, and many other stock concepts in social science. These are not just abstractions; they are abstractions with a past. Over years of application, they have proven as concrete in their effects as they have proven convenient in the hands of those who seek to justify domination. [...]

There are many ways to tell a tale, and the social scientist is not the only animal in the forest. I have chosen for the moment to make the social scientist central to an intellectual narrative that highlights sexuality. In this telling, researchers engaged in the study of everything from ritual to social change have cut their eye-teeth on documents that locate eroticism at the heart of the darkness that becomes a discipline. Many a researcher has gone on to save her professional hide by penning a manuscript dotted with arguments that appeal to “sexuality” to make a case. And that, best beloved colleagues, is how the social scientist got his spots.

### Data on the Half-Shell

Social science researchers who come into this inheritance find themselves in a real quandary. On the one hand, they know they bring concerns and convictions to their projects, which means that their data is always produced, usually analyzed, and frequently theorized, just-so. Even the concepts they use to frame questions can carry an erotic charge. On the other hand, they go to work in a world that treats social scientists as the bringers of data. In this view, data figures as pure content, waiting for collection like cans on the street or driftwood on the beach. Forget the theory and analytics. With researchers cast as data-bearers, the contribution of social science to an understanding of sexuality diminishes in the mind’s eye to the documentation of “acts” and “beliefs,” little more.

Malinowski, a leading exponent of getting it “right” when it comes to the fauna, can be

thought of as a data collector, or he can be remembered as someone who made sexuality into the terrain of an early foray into interdisciplinarity. In *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, Malinowski held up Freudian models for cross-cultural inspection, pausing along the way to reflect about the implications of his analysis for class relations in Europe. (How does the mother’s brother, ever-important in the Trobriand Islands, fit into the Oedipal triangle? The answer: He doesn’t, because psychoanalytic theory can’t do justice to his relationship with his sister’s son. The conclusion? Time for psychoanalysis to moderate some of its universalist pretensions.) Malinowski’s book does much more than report back on research findings. The point is to read Malinowski for *how* he studies as well as *what* he studies. But that sort of reading would be incompatible with the marginalization of the study of sexuality taking place within the social sciences today, a marginalization that casts “sexuality studies” as a subfield and a “strictly empirical” project, with little bearing on theory or other aspects of social life.

Under these conditions, when something becomes marked as sexual, it looms large. So large, in effect, that it can overpower the rest of a writer’s points. Margaret Mead “was amazed that the students of a professor at a Tennessee teachers’ college should have thought that her book *Coming of Age in Samoa* was ‘mainly about sex education and sex freedom,’ when ‘out of 297 pages there are exactly sixty-eight which deal with sex’” (Stocking 1992: 318). Even in passages that directly addressed sexuality, Mead analyzed and theorized, oftentimes in the description. Having noted that Tchambuli women engaged in sex play with the female masks worn by male dancers, she remarked upon “the double entendre of the situation, the spectacle of women courting males disguised as females” (Mead 1963: 256). In this instance Mead’s comments have a contemporary, almost cultural studies, ring. Passing, reversals, and mimesis are obvious components of the story, but they can scarcely be discerned in the erotic haze that descended upon her work.

To say that *Coming of Age in Samoa* is a book about sexuality is like saying that Evans-Pritchard's *The Nuer* is a book about cattle. Both statements have a certain logic, but evaluation can't stop there. *The Nuer* may be a book about cattle, but it sets up the feeding and decoration and exchange of cattle as a device for understanding lineage and alliance. Likewise with Mead. Her observations about sexuality provide a point of entree to other issues about which she cared deeply, such as childhood development and the limits of human malleability. To imagine otherwise is to employ a familiar combination of seeing and refusing to recognize, like parents who know that their son has a boyfriend but somehow refuse to find out.<sup>15</sup>

A cursory review of the ways that literary critics, historians, and cultural studies scholars have taken up social science research into their own accounts reveals the latter principle in action. Passages on initiation ceremonies and seconds-to-orgasm tend to be cited uncritically, presented as truths bereft of politics or theory, in a way that literary theory strongly counsels against. Nor are social scientists themselves immune to the ironies and seductions of "discovery." "You'll never guess how they do it in New Guinea!" "You'll never believe what this survey tells us about the difference between what Americans say they do and what they actually do when they close the bedroom door!" Got the facts, ma'am. Just the facts.<sup>16</sup>

Flora-and-fauna accounts remain a useful but limited form of investigation, dangerous to the degree that they brook no accounting. When social science goes under to the uses of documentation, it never has to acknowledge the desire for mastery bound up in the written word. It never has to call attention to the selection or interpretation of what it "finds." It can overlook the multiple ways in which "data-bearers" carry with them the histories of disciplines. It can indulge in the convenience of forgetting that the notion of (pure) data works behind the scenes to make someone's perceptions, someone else's pet theory, more palatable. The utopian fantasy of ordering your data raw depends upon the illusion that the world is your oyster.

To the degree that social science lags behind the humanities in contemporary research on sexuality, something more must be involved than mere prudishness or a recalcitrance that inexplicably afflicts social scientists more frequently than their counterparts in literature and history. Within academic divisions of labor, the notion of the social scientist as a collector of other people's data has demoted social science to a kind of unskilled labor in the fields of sexuality studies. (Honestly, Paulo, how much skill can it take to go out and observe?) Yet the history of social science disciplines testifies not so much that sexuality is good to collect, but that sexuality is good to think. For centuries scholars have used what passes for "the erotic" to work their way out of intellectual dead-ends and back into vigorous debate. To highlight the empirical here, at the expense of the analytic, places social scientists in an untenable position, because in their research the two are already one. In the food for thought served up by any scholar, data is already cooked, and in the hands of some, about to become highly spiced.

How did it happen that, by the late twentieth century, sexuality had become associated with a flora-and-fauna style of analysis, then isolated and disparaged as a fringe topic? What gives staying power to the mistaken belief that social science research on sexuality speaks for itself without offering theory or interpretation? The issues here are complex. Certainly the erasure of the intellectual history described in these pages, along with the assimilation of that history into ostensibly "asexual" topics for study, has not helped. Responsibility might also be laid at the door of an impoverished conception of the science in social science, in which knowledge appears as certitude, as fact. The kind of science most often (mis)attributed to research on gay friendship networks or fidelity in marriage is one in which the world stops turning for the observer-explorer. This is hardly the science of black holes, bubble universes, and mutable genes. But even these explanations beg the question of why an outdated conception of social science should regulate discussions of sexuality more than other areas of investigation.

There may be another culprit: an unholy alliance between the deskilling of social scientists in the popular imagination and the packaging of eroticism into a separate and distinct sphere. Following Foucault, Steven Seidman (1991) has argued that the imaginative segregation of sexuality from other aspects of social life is a relatively recent historical development that preceded the emergence of the LGBT movement. But the erotic sphere, once established, came to signify a domain of pleasure, frivolity, and fluff, a domain ostensibly peripheral to social life and therefore hardly a matter for serious investigation. No easy route to tenure here!

These historical developments are critical to understanding how sexuality, once ensconced in debate at the disciplinary center, became sidelined with respect to the simmering controversies and burning issues of the present day. Under such conditions, “sexuality studies” and “lesbian/gay studies” – like the ethnic studies programs that these would-be fields took as their model – tended to assume the shape of a bounded area of scholarship. Coincidentally (or not), the emergence of lesbian/gay studies as a discrete field of study corresponded with a move away from discrete, canonical academic subfields such as political sociology or economic anthropology. Once bounded, the study of sexuality was bound to resemble an intellectual backwater in a society increasingly preoccupied with themes of displacement, border-crossing, and change.

While many social scientists today are busy talking diaspora, race, territoriality, civil society, secularism, transnationalism, capitalist restructuring, and global relations, when it comes to sexuality people want to know what “the X” *really* do in the privacy of the shack, the hut, or the boudoir. This is the language of ethnonostalgia, a language of false certitude and mystified connection.<sup>17</sup> It is part of the mechanism by which flora-and-fauna studies pretend to be the whole of what social science can contribute to an understanding of sexuality, as well as the mechanism by which the sexuality embedded in workaday social science concepts is minimized or disappeared. Easy then to ghettoize the study of sexuality, making it fit for queers or for no study at all. How far is this scholarly marketing practice, really, from

the retailing of a video such as *Sacred Sex*, which promises to instruct the buyer, in return for her contribution to public television, in “Tantric techniques” that will “prolong lovemaking pleasure”?<sup>18</sup> Both are exoticizing, orientalizing, portable, importable, eminently collectible, and oh so convenient on the replay.

[...]

## NOTES

*Acknowledgments:* Rosemary Coombe and Geeta Patel generously agreed to read and comment upon an early draft of this introduction. [...]

- 1 For the articles in *Glamour* and *Redbook*, see Cunningham (1992) and Salter (1992), respectively. Despite these developments, research funding and job opportunities remained limited for scholars who named “sexuality” as their topic. Sociologists and anthropologists who have called for the social sciences to “open up” to the study of sexuality are well aware of the obstacles, both inside and outside academic institutions, that continue to block such research (see Lewin and Leap 1996; Namaste 1994; Newton 1993c). Relatively few social scientists, such as Rosalind Morris (1995), have attempted to bridge the disciplinary divide by acknowledging the impact of humanities scholarship (e.g., performance theory) on the study of sex and gender within the social sciences.
- 2 See Basu (1993); Bleys (1995); Chow (1995); J. Kelly (1991); Nandy (1983); Patel (1997b); Sarkar (1994); Sinha (1995).
- 3 The phrase “thinking sex” derives from Gayle Rubin’s (1984) classic article by the same name.
- 4 Entries appear in the index for Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1961).
- 5 Gilbert Herdt (1991a, 1991b) refers to this phenomenon as the conceptualization of sexuality as an “it-entity.”
- 6 Of course, one could argue that the bulk of social science research has always referred back to a Euro-American “Us.” In this sense, the most culturally relative account of erotic practices “over there” becomes an implicit comparison with and commentary upon the situation “back here” (see Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Ruth Benedict, for example, famously observed that Zuni could effectively

accomplish “divorce” by setting a husband’s belongings “on the doorsill” (see Stocking 1992: 299, who notes Benedict’s emphasis on “the ease of sexuality” that prevailed in matrilineal pueblos). Widespread quotation of this particular observation by Benedict can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that she wrote during an era in which divorce remained notoriously difficult to obtain under the jurisdiction of United States courts. By way of contrast, David Damrosch’s (1995) reading of Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes Tropiques* notes the gap between Lévi-Strauss’s positive description of Nambikwara male-male sex and the pejorative language applied later in the book to the gay male residents of Fire Island’s Cherry Grove. In Cherry Grove, wrote Lévi-Strauss, “sterile couples can be seen returning to their chalets pushing prams (the only vehicles suitable for the narrow paths) containing little but weekend bottles of milk that no baby will consume” (quoted in Damrosch 1995: 9).

7 In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep categorized “puberty rites” as rites of separation “whose sexual nature is not to be denied and which are said to make the individual a man or a woman, or fit to be one....they are followed by rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality and, in all societies and all social groups, into a group confined to persons of one sex or the other” (1960: 67).

8 See Delaney (1991). Like Lévy-Bruhl (1923: 438–439), Malinowski (1927: 19 *passim*) found himself preoccupied with the question of whether “savages” understood the details of conception. He found it “extraordinary” (given his belief in an ordered evolutionary hierarchy) that Melanesians should share the Australian aborigines’ reputed ignorance of “the natural connection between intercourse and birth.” Malinowski’s own ignorance, willful or otherwise, of the complexities of colonial relations comes through in his choice of anecdotes to illustrate his argument. In one, a young Papuan who has been away for two years becomes angry when a white man intimates that the recent birth of a child to the Papuan’s wife demonstrates her infidelity (recounted in Stocking 1992: 255). The young man’s response speaks as much or more to the economy of race and indentured labor in which he found himself than it does to any timeless “cultural” unfamiliarity with the facts of conception.

The plantation system placed numerous strictures on sexuality; moreover, a situation in which a representative of the colonial powers made such an innuendo at the expense of the colonized could easily double as provocation.

9 Malinowski (1966: 40) later revised his analysis, noting that he had taken this particular exchange out of context by overlooking its place in a longer chain of transactions.

10 On changes in the meaning of “culture,” see Sapir (1963) and Wagner (1981). Freud was not the only writer who opposed culture (or “civilization”) to instinct. Malinowski, following his lead, included an entire section on “Instinct and Culture” in *Sex and Repression in Savage Society*, where he argued that “between the human parent and child under conditions of culture there must arise incestuous temptations which are not likely to occur in animal families governed by true instincts” (1927: 164). According to Jeffrey Weeks (1986: 47), “The Darwinian revolution in biology, which demonstrated that man was part of the animal world, encouraged the search for the animal in man, and found it in his sex.” For a critique of the utility of the culture concept for the analysis of social relations in the late twentieth century, see Abu-Lughod (1991); Coombe (1997); Thomas (1991); and Wagner (1981).

11 European explorers kidnapped Native Americans, too, and brought them back to Europe for profit and display (Takaki 1993: 30–31).

12 See, for a start, Asad (1973), Behar (1996), Diamond (1992), and Wolf (1996) on the politics of alliances between the social sciences and governments, power elites, reformers, employers, and social movements.

13 A debt evident across the decades, from Richard Burton’s and F. F. Arbuthnot’s (1995) early translation of the *Kama Sutra* to Foucault’s (1978: 57) attribution of a static *ars erotica* to “China, Japan, India, Rome, [and] the Arabo-Moslem societies.” Foucault postulated the *ars erotica* as a counterpoint to the West’s *scientia sexualis*, both mechanisms for producing “the truth of sex.”

14 For the accounts that sparked the initial controversy over the impact of erotic attraction

on a researcher's perceptions and agenda, see Malinowski (1989) and Rabinow (1977). For more recent discussion of the same topic, see Kulick and Willson (1995). On the question of whether sleeping with people "in the field" can constitute an ethical research practice, see Altork (1995); Bolton (1991, 1995); and Murray (1991, 1996).

15 Interesting, too, that Mead – unlike Malinowski or Evans-Pritchard, who also wrote explicitly about "sex" – is the one more likely to be remembered as a chronicler of sexuality. Although it is common to cite Mead's reputation as a "popularizer" for the disregard in which her work came to be held by colleagues, reading practices that eroticized her work by reading it back through her body may also have contributed to her loss of stature well before the onset of the Mead/Freeman controversy. [...]

16 The citational practices described here are so widespread that to hold up one or two examples for censure would unfairly single out their authors. Some historians have credited social scientists such as McIntosh (1981) or Gagnon and Simon (1973) with giving them a greater sense of the variability and constructedness of the erotic (see Bleys 1995: 6). For the most part, however, humanities scholarship on sexuality continues to turn to social science for ostensibly factual data and evidentiary support.

17 "Ethnonostalgia" is a term coined by Diane Nelson in association with Mario Loarca (1996: 289) to describe the lingering power of "the primitive-modern divide." Nelson studied Mayan activists in Guatemala who used their skills as computer hackers to further political organization. She credits ethnonostalgia for the chuckles elicited by the very notion of a "Maya hacker" from friends and colleagues back in the States.

18 The video in question appeared in the "WGBH Boston Video" catalogue for Summer 1997, p. 38.

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